

Bleeding Brotherhood

Von Peacer

Kapitel 5: Ezio Auditore, 1503

"Are you sure you want to do this today?" Machiavelli watched Ezio like a hawk as the latter put on his armour, carefully fastening the numerous straps so it wouldn't hinder him in his movements. Any other day Ezio would probably have made a joke about how he never would have thought Machiavelli cared, but his sombre mood made him unusual serious.

"It can't wait. The senator needs to repay his debt before the collectors find and kill him. He's the only lead to the Banker we have, so we can't jeopardize this mission."

That was the speech he had convinced himself with to get out of bed this morning and continue his work, and if Machiavelli wondered at how rehearsed it sounded, he didn't comment on it. Ezio was grateful for that.

"Be careful. As one of Cesare's generals, he is sure to be well protected. Take no unnecessary risks." The silent 'we can't afford to lose you' was left unsaid, but not unheard.

Ezio nodded. "I'll return successful." That was the least he could do to honour Nico's sacrifice. Without another word he pulled his hood over his head and left the hideout, feeling Machiavelli's worried gaze follow him until he was out of sight. He didn't even spare Veronica a second glance as he passed her in the hallway, already completely focused on his mission.

As it turned out, it was a long and tedious mission. After giving Egidio the money, he had to follow him over the rooftops for several blocks, staying out of sight of the men accompanying the senator, as well as the numerous archers and crossbowmen stationed on the rooftops. Those he took out with deadly precision before they could alarm anyone to his presence, feeling less remorseful about their deaths than usual, but not wanting to think about the reason for that.

He completely focused on his mission, gladly pushing everything else aside for now, relishing in the feeling of jumping from roof to roof and masterfully balancing over washing lines hung between buildings, easily following his targets until they finally reached the Pantheon where the guard carrying the money went inside, presumably to count it while the others stayed outside guarding the entrance.

Ezio thought quickly. Either he could wait for the guard to finish and continue following them to the location of the Banker or ... His eyes fell on the open roof of the building before him and he smirked, immediately looking for a way to get up there, his decision made.

Ezio finished putting on the guard's armour and quickly hid the body and his own

clothing before finally stepping outside to join his impatient, new comrades, just in time to stop them from killing the senator. It was good to know it had been the right decision to infiltrate the Pantheon and don this disguise. He could have done nothing to help Egidio from his place on the roofs without putting this whole mission in jeopardy.

Speaking of his mission, apparently he was supposed to lead the way. Just his luck. Carefully judging the reactions of the guards following him, he started making his way through the streets of Rome, soon enough getting a feeling in what direction they were heading which made it that much easier to stay inconspicuous. Listening to their babbling soon gave him an idea what their destination was: the Vaticano District. It was the only place lying in this direction that was big enough to hold a party of the proportion they were talking about, and the most secure, much to his displeasure - not that he had expected an easy assassination.

It turned out to be even harder than expected. Not long after his successful infiltration as Luigi, his cover was blown and in a place crawling with guards to top it off. The only reason he hadn't been caught yet was thanks to the courtesans present, who had immediately sent for back-up and reported the situation to Claudia, and were now taking care of getting him closer to his target.

It was a very slow process, but Ezio had been an assassin for a long time now and even if he had been the opposite of patient in the beginning, he had learned that being hasty would only get him killed and let his target escape.

He had also learned to trust his instincts, and they told him that he was being followed. Knowing that he would have been attacked or at least discovered by now if his shadow wanted him ill, he could only assume that it was in fact an ally. And the fact that he didn't reveal himself and was able to keep from being discovered, despite his eagle eyes, told him that it was most likely one of his recruits.

As if he hadn't enough to deal with at the moment. He just hoped that the recruit was smart enough to stay hidden and not to compromise his mission. Either way, he was going to give him hell once this was over.

Ezio was now in front of some stairs blocked by a handful of guards, watching his target make his way up and trying to find a way to follow him without being noticed. He sent his loyal courtesans out to distract those in his way, then rounded the stairs, keeping hidden behind the walls. After making sure no one was looking in his direction, he climbed his way up and kept following the guard with the chest at a safe distance while a courtesan messed with his head, thus lowering his guard considerably.

He finally made it to the place where the real party was being held, and for once, luck was on his side as the Banker finally made his appearance, introducing himself as Juan Borgia to the unfortunate courtesan that had caught his attention.

Of course. He should have known Cesare wouldn't leave his funds in the hands of anyone but his family.

He stealthily proceeded to follow his target, slinking from group to group to stay undetected, waiting for his opportunity to strike, all the while listening to the Borgia's speech about power. He'd realize soon enough that no amount of power could protect him from the Assassin. He'd make sure of that.

It was at that moment he spotted Cesare and the Spaniard, and it was only due to his long trained self-control he neither froze on the spot nor charged them mindlessly, but instead hopped into the conveniently placed hay cart, his heart beating faster

despite him, and watched the Borgias from his hiding spot. What were they doing here? Cesare he could understand, after all he had an image to keep and showing up to gloat at such a party sure fit his goal, but the Pope?

Well, at least it explained why there were so many guards around.

He listened to Cesare's boisterous speech about uniting all of Italia under his banner, noticed the look on Rodrigo's face that clearly told that this wasn't according to his plan and that he didn't like it one bit - which was probably what he told his son after he finished his speech - and then Ezio's silly shadow chose the worst possible moment to make its appearance, stepping out in the open just at the moment the Pope let his eyes wander across the room.

Ezio reacted instantly and reached out of his hiding spot to sling an arm around the waist of the recruit, the other across the mouth to keep him from shouting out his surprise, and pulled him to safety, all in the matter of barely a second. The recruit only struggled for a moment before realizing what had happened, then fell still and waited silently for him to say something.

He first made sure that his little stunt hadn't drawn too much attention and heaved a sigh of relief when the Spaniard shook his head and made his way inside, seemingly not having spotted his stupid recruit after all. Then he turned to said recruit, still pinned under him and furiously demanded, "What do you think you are doing?"

Veronica looked at him with wide eyes before her stubbornness kicked in. "I thought nobody was looking in my direction! How could I have foreseen that Rodrigo would choose that moment to look over the crowd?" she whispered in reply, at least as furious as he and pushed against his hold, but he wasn't relenting.

"I meant why are you even here? Wasn't I clear enough when I gave you the day off?" She held his burning gaze for a second before looking away. "I was worried and wanted to help."

Ezio snorted. "A great job you did there," he answered sarcastically, before finally rolling off her and peeking out of their hiding spot. "You wait here. Once I kill the Banker, you should easily be able to get out of here with me drawing all the attention. Got it?"

When she didn't answer, he turned around and looked at her sternly. "Got it?"

She pressed her lips together, but finally nodded reluctantly, probably realizing he wouldn't accept any protests. "Got it."

With that, he checked one last time if the coast was clear, then swiftly climbed out of the hay cart and immediately took cover in a group of people that waited beside it. With a quick glance, he took in the position of the guards, his target and hiding spots and decided how best to proceed.

He slowly started to make his way to the Banker, waiting in groups until the guards looked the other way, then proceeding to the next bench, then to a group of courtesans, and then he was finally in reach of his target, waiting on another bench for him to pass this way again and readying his hidden blade.

His body tensed when his target approached; he was finally close enough and Ezio reacted in an instant, grabbing him and burying his hidden blade deep into his back before placing him on the same bench where he had waited for the kill.

While the guards stood around in confusion and shock, instead of taking the opportunity to get away, Ezio took the time to listen to the last words of his enemy and say his blessing. They may have stood on different sides, but that didn't mean he wouldn't show him this last respect. That's how he was taught, and that's how he would always handle it.

The moment the Banker took his very last breath, the guards came out of their stupor and drew their weapons, crying in alarm. But Ezio was already running, pushing through the crowd, jumping over the wall and doing a perfect leap of faith into the hay stack ten meters below, which he had seen during his infiltration.

He immediately got out and running again, sure that the guards wouldn't give up so easily and needing the head start to get out of enemy territory. But instead of ducking into a dark alley and disappearing from his pursuers' view, he swiftly scaled up the wall and made his way over the rooftops where he was easily spotted.

Just as planned, as he wanted to draw enough attention to himself to give his silly recruit a chance to make her escape.

A quick glance behind him confirmed that it worked out all too well. There were at least half a dozen agile guards easily following over the rooftops, even slowly catching up, and he was quite sure that the others, not quite as nimble, were waiting for him on the ground.

Ezio quickly took in his surroundings, his mind whirling, trying to come up with the best strategy to escape. After a moment, he decided that getting to the river was probably his best bet, and he pushed himself even more, praying that his head start was enough to get there without having to fight.

Taking out the crossbowman in front of him with a precisely thrown knife cost him about half a second, which very nearly turned out to be fatal in the end. He was about five feet from the edge of the roof and thus the saving jump into the river when one of the Agiles pursuing him made a desperate lunge at him, managed to catch him off guard, too focused on his escape that was so very close.

He stumbled as the guard got hold of his right leg, desperately trying to free himself while simultaneously fighting to keep his balance. He did manage to free his leg with a sharp tug, but that proved to be a very big mistake, as he lost his balance for good and went crashing down.

He went right over the edge and to the street below, and this time, there was no hay stack to cushion his fall. The impact pushed the breath right out of him and black dots sprinkled his vision as he desperately fought not to lose consciousness, gritting his teeth against the pain and inwardly screaming at his body to move, *move* before the guards could finish him. It felt like an eternity before he finally managed to roll from his back to the side, hissing as his bruised body protested against the mistreatment, and struggled to his feet, stumbling more than actually walking the small distance to the little wall, which was the last obstacle between him and freedom.

Then he finally crossed it and fell down into the safety of the river.

Veronica took her demotion from team leader and her rank as Milite to Assistente with a straight face, clearly regretting her decision to go against Ezio's order, especially since she had turned out to be more of a burden than of any help.

He assigned Flavio as the new leader since he trusted the gentle giant to keep a calm head at all times and still be strong minded enough to keep his temperamental teammate in check and thus out of trouble.

When he dismissed the team, Veronica hesitated for a moment, clearly wishing to speak with him, but not quite daring with so many people around. She settled for a quick bow and a mumbled apology and he nodded curtly before turning his back to her, arms crossed and walking over to Machiavelli, hearing the light footsteps of the recruit disappearing down the hallway.

He sat down in the chair with a grimace, as the movement upset his more than likely

cracked ribs - he had yet to go see a doctor - and Claudia had been the one to fix him up when he stumbled into the hideout yesterday, all the while cursing him for being a reckless idiot. "So, what's next?" Ezio demanded with a cocky grin, thus successfully distracting Machiavelli from commenting on his injuries.

"This," he simply said and handed Ezio a letter which he quickly read, his expression becoming ever more worried.

Finally he looked up, troubled. "This comes at a very bad time. But I can't refuse to lend my help to the Medici, not when our families have been friends for so many years."

"They are important supporters to our cause," Machiavelli agreed. "And the reward they're promising for your help is dearly needed."

"But what about Bartolomeo? I had planned on helping him get rid of these French bastardi."

"If you make haste, you'll be back in less than two weeks. He will be able to hold his position for that long, we'll make sure of that."

Ezio nodded. Right. He wasn't alone anymore. He had a whole Brotherhood to rely on now, and he should probably get used to the idea that he didn't have to handle everything on his own anymore. He could even send a recruit to fulfil this assassination contract, but the friendship between the Auditore and Medici family compelled him to do this himself.

"Then I'll be on my way," he said and got up from the chair, unsuccessfully trying to suppress a wince when the movement sent a sharp pain through his chest again. Maybe he should go see a doctor before he departed after all.

Machiavelli seemed to be of the same opinion. "Be careful, Ezio," he cautioned and the Assassin sent him a reassuring smile.

"Aren't I always?" With that, he strode out of the room, his dignified exit a bit tarnished by the slight limp he failed to hide.

"You're leaving?"

Ezio put the last of his supplies in the saddlebag and carefully closed it before turning around, a small smile on his lips. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Veronica avoided looking at him directly, instead inspecting his horse. "You've packed enough for a few days of travel," she observed quietly, so unlike her usual boisterous, confident self that it almost made Ezio feel guilty about reprimanding her so harshly this morning, but only almost.

"A friend in Firenze needs my help," he explained while checking the gear of the horse. He winced when he bent over a bit too far and his ribs protested again, despite having a healing salve applied and now being neatly bandaged by a doctor - who had also warned him to take it easy in his old age. Tontolone.

"Maybe you should rest a bit." That woman couldn't help but share her opinion. It seemed like she had already forgotten about mimicking the despondent recruit.

Ezio held back a comment about how he would have more than likely escaped unscathed if it hadn't been for her and his attempt to lure the guards away. She had learned her lesson, no need to rub salt in the wound. Instead, he adopted a carefree smile. "There's no rest for the wicked." He saw her sceptical look and sighed. "I'll be fine. If a little fall could kill me, I would have been dead a long time ago."

He reached out and ruffled her hair, much to her exasperation. "Now, be a good little recruit and go back to your training. I want to see some results when I get back." He gave her a very suggestive look, then swung himself upon his horse and galloped

away, right through a group of thieves who called insults after him, grinning and leaving a flustered Veronica behind.

Ezio hated to admit it, but he had probably pushed himself too far after all. He might have already made the journey from Roma to Firenze in three days, but that was when he was healthy and, he grudgingly thought, a bit younger.

He was completely exhausted when he finally trotted through the gates of Firenze, only his pride holding him upright instead of slumping over the neck of his loyal horse while the last rays of the setting sun illuminated his back. Maybe he should have listened to the advice of his friends and doctor after all and taken it a bit easier, but his inner restlessness had driven him on to complete this mission as fast as possible. He was more worried about leaving the Brotherhood to fend for itself than he admitted, even though he knew Machiavelli would take good care of everyone. He had a feeling Bartolomeo would need his help sooner rather than later, even though the man, at least as proud as Ezio himself, would never admit that the French were forcing him onto the defensive.

Weary from the journey and his injuries and his mind still back in Roma, he didn't see the attack coming. One moment he was still sitting on his horse, trotting through the streets of Firenze in search of an inn he could stay in, and the next moment he lay flat on his back, having been pulled from said horse.

Lucky for him his instincts kicked in the same moment the pain registered, and he quickly rolled to his side, despite his protesting ribs, thus narrowly avoiding the sword that tried to decapitate him. A moment later he was on his feet and his sword in his hands, already blocking and countering the next strike with ease, taking advantage of their surprise that he had recovered so fast and cutting the first of the six down in a mere second.

The others took a weary step back, no one willing to make the first attack and risk going down like their comrade, despite still overpowering him five to one.

"What is it you want?" Ezio demanded, his brow furrowed and feigned an attack to keep them at bay. He had never been attacked out of the blue before, not when he had done nothing wrong and the Medici cape had given him additional protection, even after their reign had ended as they were still an influential family.

"Your death, Assassino," the most courageous one replied and attacked, but once again Ezio easily blocked the clumsy strike, twisted his wrist and disarmed his opponent in a heartbeat.

The Assassin smirked, holding his blade to his enemy's throat. "For that you have to become a lot better than this. Now answer me: who sent you?" It was clear to him that this attack had been ordered by someone knowing he'd come here. It had been too fast and well planned to be anything else, even if it had failed. And his opponents had the defined look of mercenaries; he should know as he worked with them too.

"Like we'd tell you," the one he still held at bay with his sword spit bravely, although Ezio could see the terror in his eyes.

He sighed. "So you don't know." He had expected that, but he was still a bit disappointed. He could never have any luck, could he? "Get out of here. The reward they promised is not worth your lives. Which I will definitely take if you linger," he promised and lightly poked his opponent as a warning, drawing a fine line of blood on his throat.

They stared at each other a moment longer, then at the body of their comrade, who had gone down in the blink of an eye despite them having the element of surprise,

and finally backed up, their hands raised in surrender. Then they turned tail and ran for their lives.

Ezio sheathed his sword with a sigh and turned around to look for his horse that had wandered off during the struggle.

The arrow that pierced his right shoulder took him completely by surprise.